

Going the Extra Miles: Reviewer Honored for Tireless Commitment

How does he do it? Dr. John Raymond from the Medical University of South Carolina and Ralph H. Johnson VA Medical Center has participated in about 100 peer review meetings. Even more amazing is what he said the day CSR sought to interview him about his commitment to peer review: “I have free time this afternoon after my study section teleconference,” he said. It was his second review in the month.



At this point, you might also want to ask him why. Dr. Raymond says the mental calculus he uses when asked to review is simple. “I check my calendar, and if it’s open, I say yes. I would say no if only I didn’t have the expertise. NIH peer review is one of my top priorities.”

The 2009 winner of the [Marcy Speer Outstanding CSR Reviewer Award](#) has surely been making bigger sacrifices than it seems. Few reviewers have a lot of free time, and Dr. Raymond has more responsibilities than many. He is vice president for academic affairs and provost at the Medical University of South Carolina in addition to being professor of medicine, a practicing nephrologist, VA staff physician and an NIH researcher investigating cell signaling and kidney disease.

In addition to taking on many temporary assignments, Dr. Raymond served four years as a regular member of the Molecular, Cellular and Developmental Neurosciences-5 study section, which evolved into the Molecular Neuropharmacology and Signaling study section. To help it get established, he volunteered to chair it for two additional years. Most recently, he signed up for a 4-year term on the Pathobiology of Kidney Disease.

“We’re not just impressed by the number of meetings,” said Dr. Toni Scarpa CSR Director. “He also won the Speer award for his tireless commitment to fairness and scientific rigor.”

When asked why reviewing is such a priority, he explains: “It’s an honor, it’s a privilege, and I think that bright people should understand that you get a lot back from it. I stay very, very current simply by reviewing grants.”

Participating in peer review has a greater significance for his institution. “As university provost and the chief academic officer of a free-standing health science center with high aspirations, I think it’s important to set a good example . . . participating in NIH peer review shows we give back to the research community, and in so doing we enhance the reputation of our institution.” He also noted how being a reviewer gives him insight into the direction of the science and NIH research priorities.

“We tell our researchers that NIH peer-review is an important activity,” he adds. “and we give them some credit in the tenure and promotion process for participating . . . and when they agree to serve on a study section, I always make sure I either give them a phone call or write a letter saying ‘good job.’ This is important to the university.”

How do you manage to get so much done in a day?

“I have a great secretary, so I dictate a lot of things including my reviews. I also trained at a fantastic place . . . Duke is one of the best places in the country to get internal medicine training.

You really learn how to prioritize duties well, think on the fly, multitask and be efficient in getting your job done.”

What most impressed you at your first review meeting?

“What surprised me was how enthusiastic reviewers were about trying to be advocates for early career scientists and how seriously they took the mission of prioritizing the grants. I was also impressed with how much give and take there was. People could definitely change their minds about the merits of the grant proposals, and I saw people could be very persuasive in advocating for the merits of certain grants that maybe weren’t as well received by some of the other reviewers.”

What advice would you give to a first-time reviewer?

Talk with more experienced reviews to learn the general process of peer review. Many times, you may need to read papers that are more current than you’re familiar with, or learn a little bit about a new area you have not thought about before. If you’re really going to do a fair review you’re going to have to do more than just read the grant.

And I’m not sure the first-time reviewer fully comprehends how much work goes into reviewing a grant. If you’re going to engage in a lot of peer review, it’s going to cut into either your professional or family time. Achieving balance is important. You need to have an understanding family, which I do. Nonetheless, when you’re with your family, you really need to be there.

Is it true that you once attended a study section meeting 6 days after major knee surgery?

“It probably wasn’t very smart to be on an airplane with a swollen leg, but I had made the commitment. When you learn what Marcy Speer did despite her terminal illness, getting on an airplane with a sore knee kind of pales in comparison.”

Dr. Raymond then revealed an unexpected and poignant connection to Dr. Speer. “She was a junior faculty member at Duke when I was a junior faculty member there,” he said. “Marcy’s enthusiasm and her commitment to her work and to being a real scholar were apparent from the very beginning . . . so it’s a particular honor for me to receive this having gone through the ranks around the same time.”

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